

Women's eNews

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Efforts to Track Rape Emerge Between Hurricanes

By Nancy Cook Lauer, WeNews correspondent

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (WOMENSENEWS) – Accounts of rapes in the Louisiana Superdome and other evacuee sites are beginning to trickle in to counselors and the clergy more than three weeks after Katrina hit New Orleans and just as another major hurricane is set to strike the Texas coast.

Police in major evacuation sites such as the Houston Astrodome are now accepting reports as well.

On Sept. 13 – the same day that Women's eNews reported that the Houston Police Department was not taking courtesy reports of rapes that happened in other jurisdictions – Houston Police Chief Harold Hurtt sent out a circular to personnel, instructing them to take reports and hold them for safekeeping until other police jurisdiction are prepared to deal with them, spokesperson Johanna Abad said.

Some 23,000 evacuees had been housed in the Astrodome and nearby shelters in the complex before being slowly dispersed to other cities. Fewer than 4,000 remained before the threat of Hurricane Rita caused new evacuations again this week. The evacuees were sent to Tennessee and other states, according to published reports.

Abad said the police department hadn't been taking crime reports from other jurisdictions because there was no way to code them in the computer system, but the police department found a way to make it work.

"Somebody thought it was important enough to speak to the chief about it, and it got done immediately," Abad said in a Sept. 16 interview.

Abad said she had put out word to the local media that the police were taking the reports, so that victims would know to tell officers if they had been raped. The new directive applies to all Houston police, not just those guarding the Astrodome, she said.

It was unknown whether any reports have been taken however, because telephone lines remained tied up Thursday as Houston prepared for Hurricane Rita, barreling toward the Texas coast. No rape reports had been taken as of late last week, Abad said.

Witnesses Talk to Counselors

Reports by people who said they witnessed rapes are starting to filter in to rape counselors, said Judy Benitez, executive director of the Louisiana Foundation Against Sexual Assault in Hammond.

The foundation is beginning to compile a database of reports without specifically naming victims but including enough details about incidents in an attempt to rule out duplicates and get a better count, she said. The reports are being taken from victims as well as witnesses, Benitez said, but she did not know how many reports had been gathered by late Wednesday.

Under normal circumstances, Benitez said, the odds of rapes getting reported to police were somewhere between 10 percent and 25 percent of all rapes. Amid the unfathomable chaos of Hurricane Katrina, Benitez said she expects an even lower reporting rate.

“We’re getting reports from witnesses,” Benitez said. “All these witnesses are upset because they saw things going on and couldn’t do anything about them without jeopardizing their own safety.”

Other information is coming in to the media as well.

New Orleans singer-songwriter Charmaine Neville, in a Sept. 2 video aired by WAFB-TV in Baton Rouge, La., said she had reported to New Orleans police that “a lot of us women had been raped down there by guys who had come . . . into the neighborhood where we were that were helping us to save people, but other men . . . they came and they started raping women . . . and then they started killing.”

The Rev. Toby Nelson of First Presbyterian Church of Hayward in Castro Valley, Calif., told The Union newspaper of Grass Valley, Calif., in a Sept. 20 article that rapes did occur. Nelson was part of a volunteer team that went to the New Orleans Superdome the week after Hurricane Katrina hit.

“There were so many rape victims, and we had to turn (most) of them away because they had life-damaging, but not life-threatening, wounds,” Nelson said.

It’s important that rapes be reported within the first 72 hours in order to preserve evidence and deal with trauma, but reporting the events later still serves a valuable purpose, said Lorna Martin of the Division of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology at the University of Cape Town in Rondebosch, Western Cape, South Africa.

Rape Protocol for Displaced People

Martin helped develop a protocol for the clinical management of rape survivors among refugees and internally displaced people that was published in 2004 by the World Health Organization-United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Physical injuries from rape can be detected up to a week later, and testing for HIV and AIDS can commence as early as six weeks after a rape, the protocol states.

Benitez says scars to the psyche can take even longer to manifest, which is why the sexual abuse related to Hurricane Katrina shouldn't be discounted even though reports are coming in slowly.

“Even when one might not expect injuries, the survivor might feel that she has been injured. A careful inspection with subsequent reassurance that no physical harm has been done may be of great benefit to the patient and might be the main reason she is seeking care,” the protocol states. “The majority of rape survivors never tell anyone about the incident. If the survivor has told you what happened, it is a sign that she trusts you. Your compassionate response to her disclosure can have a positive impact on her recovery.”

Women often don't report they've been raped, Benitez said, because there is a lingering social stigma to this particular crime. Men are even less likely to report rapes for this reason, she said. Victims also are hesitant because they don't want to relive the trauma or they may feel shame or even guilt that it happened to them, she said.

Just as authorities in the affected cities prepare to deal with past rape allegations, other groups are pointing to the potential for a new risk, the thousands of registered sex offenders who fled in the aftermath of the hurricane and have scattered across the nation.

“It is estimated that over 4,000 offenders are staying at the shelters with all other evacuees,” said David Scott of the Coral Springs, Fla.-based Web site, sexualoffenders.com. “Here in Florida, sex offenders are prohibited from staying at shelters in the event of a natural disaster. Because of the nature of the disaster and the large number of people who were affected, even though IDs are checked, it's been impossible to check people's names against the state or national sex offender registry. Now that things are somewhat settling, the local authorities definitely need to promptly solve this matter, before children can fall prey to those sex offenders.”

Nancy Cook Lauer is a journalist in Tallahassee, Fla.

For more information:

Rape-Reporting Procedure Missing After Hurricane:
<http://womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/2448>

Commentoon--Hurricane Katrina: <http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/2447/>

Health Workers Fly to Aid Female Katrina Survivors:
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